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Research fellowship in Nicaragua valuable experience for biology student

Alexis Toruño '17 suspected that her research trip to Nicaragua this past summer was going to provide real-world application to her studies. She didn't expect it to be such a revelation.

Last spring, Alexis, along with biology major [Frida Ceja](#) '17, received National Institute for Health (NIH) Global Health Disparities Research Fellowships through UC Berkeley's Center for Emerging and Neglected Diseases. The fellowships were funded by NIH's Minority Health and Health Disparities International Research Training (MHIRT).

The MHIRT/Nicaragua experience was both a cultural awakening and career validation for Alexis, a senior biology major in the [School of Health and Natural Sciences](#).

"I was able to experience having a lab job and a mini-career in my field, which is invaluable when deciding a professional progression. It made me fall in love with science all over again," says Alexis, who presented her research at the U.C. Berkeley Global Health Student Symposium in October.

Upon arrival in Nicaragua, Alexis was sent to the Socrates Flores Vivas Health Center in Managua. She was in an entourage of doctors and phlebotomists who walked door to door in impoverished neighborhoods collecting blood samples for a seroprevalence study.

"We needed to know how much of the population had been exposed to the disease, and they were our sample population," Alexis explains.

Alexis eventually landed in the laboratories of the National Ministry of Health. She studied the chikungunya and dengue viruses, which are transmitted by the same mosquitoes that carry Zika virus. It was a challenging environment for Alexis, yet she felt confident and comfortable working alongside other MHIRT fellowship students who were older and from larger universities. She credits her work in Dr. Roland Cooper's Research Methodology class in the [Department of Natural Sciences and Mathematics](#).

"My experience working in the lab at Dominican really prepared me. The skills I learned here are transferable skills that can help me anywhere," says Alexis, who followed her older brother Henry Toruño '15 (now working at Genentech and pursuing his master's degree at USF) to Dominican. "I count my lucky stars that I ended up here."

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